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Film/Video arts column

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Symptoms indicating the state of health of media arts are easy to find, but good diagnosis remains elusive, though always tempting. On consecutive weekends at the end of October, I attended the National Video Festival held by the American Film Institute and the Experimental Film Coalition's fourth annual festival. The differences seem instructive.

The video event took place at glitzy AFI headquarters, a former college campus overlooking Hollywood and L.A. Four days and nights of screenings in many different rooms presented a major retrospective series of network and independent documentaries about Vietnam, a celebration of Brazilian tv and video, prize winning international tv, and new Yugoslav work. I attended two tracks: a thematic grouping around sex and gender (with a lot of AIDS videos), and a selection of new video art by Neil Seiling.

A certain excitement and enthusiasm went along with the event. In addition to the local audience, many of the artists whose work was screened attended as well as curators, programmers, administrators, teachers and critics involved in independent video around the country. The people I hung out with thought this year's selection displaced the former favoritism shown to "marshmallow video," though a prominent Nam June Paik installation evidenced the tradition. Notably, the work I saw had something to say and a passion for saying it--most obviously with the AIDS videos. In curating new work, Seiling deliberately cast a wide net by including more "marginal" examples--by feminists, gays, leftists, Canadians, midwesterners, etc.--and exhibited a vital and diverse video culture.

The EFC's festival ran two evenings of screenings and an afternoon sample of films from Frankfurt, Germany, in a modest auditorium at Northwestern University in Evanston IL. Each night it attracted a decent crowd which withered away as the four hour long marathon sessions ground out more and more films. Yet there were few surprises, little that was ground-breaking, unruly, crazy, or angry. The established filmmakers presented accomplished work which affirmed their careers, while the young seemed to dutifully follow along. Not exactly the symptoms of a vibrant avant garde,

and I couldn't help but wonder if the Halloween night audience consisted of people who hadn't been invited to parties.

Much of the social rebelliousness of the New American Cinema of 20 years ago disappeared when pornographic images moved above ground, drug taking turned out to have a downside, and filmmakers moved from the streets into the galleries and colleges. An ideology of the artisan filmmaker, owner of his/her own tools, carefully crafting and controlling the whole process turned film into a peculiar area of technical expertise demanding a long apprenticeship. In contrast, video attracts makers who, in a notable number of cases, have limited technical knowledge or ability and who simply hire technicians and rent services to accomplish what they want. If this is artistically alarming (how can they shape form or develop style without knowing the equipment and process?), it has to be admitted that they get the product out there, on time and on budget, and every year. Meanwhile contemporary experimental filmmakers often choose projects and techniques that are personally labor intensive and take a long time to complete.

Another revealing difference is distribution itself. The experimental filmmaker typically completes a film and feels lucky to have one or two prints to deposit in one of the two distribution coops, one to send to festivals, and another to use for personal appearances. A successful film may go around for several years before being seen by very much of the art community. In comparison, video gets almost instant response by the video artworld. Copies are relatively cheap, and you can hit every festival and still pay the bills. Showing at the AFI festival means exposure to many distributors, exhibitors, critics, funders, and taste makers.

For better and for worse, video seems infinitely more hip and trendy than film today. The glowing screen is open to odd and dissenting forms while experimental film seems much more attentive to tradition and craft. The video art community tolerates some of the worst acting and inept direction I've ever seen, and uncritically accepts awful camera and sound.

Perhaps because video is so new, so undervalued (MoMA just presented its first one person video retrospective--of Bill Viola's work), it tolerates everything. At the AFI festival I realized that broadcast industry insiders making "white paper" documentaries for the networks were present because they too are marginalized by the norms of commercial entertainment. While the video scene is still wide open to everything, the experimental film situation seems perversely ingrown and inbred, dedicated to guarding its boundaries, insistent on arcane technical knowledge and peculiar exhibition rituals. If it's presumptuous to diagnose film's termination, the symptoms are hardly encouraging.

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Co-editor of Jump Cut, Chuck Kleinhans is busy transferring most of his films to video.